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More U.S. 'secrets' on way

By RICHARD REEVES

WASHINGTON — The most important thing about President Reagan's speech on national defense may not be the debate that began after it, but the debate that went on before it.

The debate after the speech was the almost incredulous reaction to the president's proposal for some sort of futuristic anti-missile defense system. The spontaneous coining of comic references — "Star Wars" — indicated the world isn't quite ready to consider a future that far away.



But the debate inside the White House before the speech was critical to the near future — and to the present. The president and his advisers were arguing over how much "secret" information to release to the public.

THE RESOLUTION, this time, was compromise: Reagan showed classified aerial photographs taken by planes of potentially hostile military installations, but did not use photographs taken by satellite cameras.

Up until the day of the speech, many of the men around Reagan had been urging him to declassify — and show the American people on television — reconnaissance photos taken by spy satellites hovering over the Soviet Union and places such as Syria.

Those pictures are really something — at least that is what I have been told by Defense Department analysts who say you can read the license plates on trucks bouncing along Russian roads.

But, in the end, the president decided to declassify and show only photographs taken from SR-71 reconnaissance planes, the high-flying "black birds" that replaced our old fleet of U-2 spy planes.

The pictures, not too frightening, showed military installations in Cuba and Nicaragua, and an airfield on the Caribbean island of Grenada, which may or may not have military significance and which American companies are actually helping to build.

Wait till next time. Even as the president's men are instituting and enforcing new rules to classify more and more information and to punish bureaucrats who can't convince lie detectors they are not leaking that

information, those same men are just bursting to begin showing to the press and the nation some of the photos, facts, figures and interpretations surreptitiously collected by American intelligence.

"I wish I could just give you the threat briefing," Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger has said to me and, I'm sure, to other reporters. "Then you'd understand."

THE PHOTOGRAPHS Reagan decided not to show last week are part of "the threat briefing." It's a 4-hour slide and graph show on Soviet military capability that is classified "top secret."

Its principal audience, so far, has been members of Congress (those with the necessary security clearances) and foreign leaders. The show is designed to scare their pants off — and usually it does.

It happens that this administration thinks Americans would be better off if they were scared, shaken up a bit. What people don't know doesn't frighten them — you can't build a national consensus for greatly increased defense spending with classified information. "Top secret" information is no information in the struggle for the hearts and the minds of the American people.

Democracy is driven by information, by what we know and when we know it. And, in terms of information, the United States is becoming more and more democratic.

New technologies, like direct satellite television feeds from Beirut and San Salvador, often give the rest of us information at the same time as the president and the secretary of defense.

THAT DEMOCRATIZATION of information, and of defense and foreign policy decision making, makes certain kinds of leadership, based on control of the flow of information, things of the past.

Between presidents and leakers, both eager to get their message (and information supporting it) into the dialogue of public opinion, it is only a matter of time before more and more classified information and film begin appearing on prime-time television, and presidents and generals begin to have less power over questions of peace and war.

Richard Reeves' column is distributed by Universal Press Synd.